RADIOHEAD

THEY'RE SO F—ING SPECIAL: (L-R) JONNY, ED, THOM, PHIL AND COLIN

BIGGEST

OK, so RADIOHEAD may not *want* to be the biggest band in the world but they're certainly heading that way. *NME* hops aboard the luxury tourbuses to witness the 'Head's unwitting world domination. Computer boffins: TED KESSLER (words) ROGER SARGENT (photos)

'WE NEVER WANTED TO BE THE BAND iN THE WORLD'

May 23, 1997, noon

Radiohead boys, they are here, shag your women and drink your... yes, well, quite. Let's not get carried away. We are in Barcelona, the sun is dry and hot, and the five bad boys from Oxford are in town. But that distant rumble, that isn't Thom Yorke taking on the locals with a broken bottle, that's the sound of the worldwide media wrecking crew anxiously gnashing its collective teeth.

All roads in Barcelona seem to lead to the Ramblas, the city's main tree-lined thoroughfare, but today even the Ramblas seems peaceful in comparison to the row coming from a small road leading off its northern, well-heeled tip. This is where Radiohead have set up HQ for the next couple of days, and the lobby of the Meridian Hotel hums noisily today to the beat of many a dialect.

Step into the marbled foyer and turn left: two Austrian radio jocks are taking coffee in the bar with some of their German rivals. Just in front of them a couple of French journalists peruse the menu on the noticeboard and wonder out loud if this really is the only restaurant in the building. In the main reception area another French woman with a film crew in tow barks into a mobile phone, and over by the check-in desk some young Japanese men in baseball caps whisper excitedly and nod in the direction of the skinny Englishman jogging down the steps and out into the blistering heat. When he steps outside, three Spanish girls in Blur and Nirvana T-shirts sitting opposite the hotel leap up and fidget and giggle feverishly in his direction. That's him. The bassist.

But before the girls can get across the road, Colin Greenwood's party have disappeared into the Ramblas, their progress obscured, improbably, by an explosion of noise and colour created by a student demonstration which suddenly bursts around the corner. But the girls are not disappointed by this obstruction. Laughing, they slump to the ground again, and one takes out a notebook and starts to scribble in it. Unlike the ladies and gentlemen of the international press in town today, these three girls are happy just to catch a candid glimpse of any member of Radiohead.

If, however, they had the front to sweep past the main desk and up the four floors to the hotel's suites they would discover much more to fill their notebooks with. Here, in a large, airy, cool room, three more band members are taking an hour's breather from their intensive 48-hour tour of press, promotional and musical duty.

Slumped on a sofa in the most shaded corner of the room, Jonny Greenwood reads from a paperback, while next to him, Thom Yorke leans over his knees and stares into space. Panning back across to the sunny side of the room, Ed O'Brien sits smoking in a straight-backed chair alongside a couple of women from his record company who are picking from a sandwich tray. And sitting at the large table in front of them is Chris Hufford, the band's manager. He folds away a mobile phone, scribbles some last-minute adjustments to today's schedule on one of the sheets of paper in front of him and leans back in his chair, exhaling loudly as he does so. We have reached the midway point in this first hectic leg of 'OK Computer''s journey to the masses' bosom. No think and do nothing.

But the wheels that power the Radiohead juggernaut have started to roll again. Things may be still and calm in this quiet room, but out there, down in the teeming streets below, *everyone* wants a bite of Radiohead. Will these five delicate, intelligent men have the wits and energy to stave off the predatory hunger of a global market that sees them as this year's main dish? We will have to wait and see. First we take Barcelona, then we take Berlin...

November 3, 2pm

Two articulated lorries and three tourbuses guard the entrance to Huxleys in Berlin. This is the Radiohead roadshow, peopled by over 30 hired hands who help grease the band's cogs away from home. The ying of sweaty, sleepless endeavour to the band's artistic yang.

"IF WE EVER MAKE A RECORD THAT'S EASY OR FUN TO MAKE, IT'S GONNA BE A SHIT RECORD." – ED

As our cab swings into a slot next to one of the buses we spy Jonny Greenwood, the band's extravagantly talented guitarist, schlepping alongside the bus in a woolly hat and parka. When he spots his press officer waving from inside the cab he brightens and, all teeth and soft brown eyes, waves back... but as soon as he sees *NME* emerge from the vehicle he stops dead and starts fiddling with the tourbus door. Damn. The key won't work.

So he scoots around to the other side, hoping for some deliverance from within the bus, but there's nobody in. Now he's trapped between the side of his bus and the cars whizzing by in the road. He'll have to come back around onto the pavement and face... the press! Oh, bollocks.

A kiss and cuddle for his PR and handshakes for *NME* dispensed with, he leads us into the venue, trudging slightly ahead and saying little. Welcome to the (mobile) house of Radiohead. Bassist Colin Greenwood and guitarist Ed O'Brien will be manning the front desk. As for the other three, well, you won't be seeing much of them.

There are many ways that bands can hate *NME*, but Radiohead's is the most reassuringly middle-class and British. It's the way that Thom Yorke will refuse to talk to us (this stems from one particular incident where we ran a news story that said Thom had thrown a fit and stormed offstage, whereas he says he was unwell and had to leave because he couldn't sing), but this won't mean we're barred from their shows. We're still invited on tour with them and everyone's very friendly, it's just that Thom's not talking to us, and neither is Jonny. In fact, even Phil Selway, *the drummer*, is giving us the bum's rush. Nicely.

So you join us in Huxleys' freezing cold main hall (a former ice rink in fact), a couple of hours before soundcheck, and the circular human geography of the situation pans out like this: at the centre of the Radiohead whirl is Colin, all reassuring arm-squeezes, cheery health enquiries and Eddie Izzard-ish charm. Mopping up any charm spillage is Ed – tall, agreeable and armed with a ready laugh. A few rungs back are Phil and Jonny, the eldest and youngest members of the group respectively, both of whom are pleasant enough, but they shy away from any chat. Skulking around the outskirts of the action is Thom, who manages a curt "Hello", but otherwise spends his time moping around the chilly venue and keeping his counsel very much to himself.

And then, bizarrely, there's Grant. Grant is a documentary-maker and he's making one right now about the life of 'OK Computer' – this involves filming *everything* that happens whilst he's around. So today, if the band are standing around scratching their arses while they wait for a photographer to change the film in his camera Grant's got it down on film. If a German TV crew turn up to interview the band, Grant's going to film them filming the interview. And if *NME* sits down backstage and chats with any member of the band, Grant's going to set up a couple of cameras, get his soundman to place a huge, furry microphone on the middle of the table and he's going to film the interview being recorded. It's a bit weird, Colin, isn't it?

"No, not at all. Life's so short, especially the life of a band. It's nice to have some record of it for when we're old and grey. And we like Grant. We don't really notice him filming."

This is not the only record of life on the road that Radiohead are making. They're also making a, er, record. Tucked away in the back of one of the buses is a portable studio and Thom's been putting down rhythm tracks and recording basic vocals for a new album in there. Producer Nigel Godrich has been out on a few dates and there's talk of setting up speakers in the bunks and eventually recording guitars that way.

"One thing about touring," says Ed, "is that you can turn into a bit of a jukebox. You rearrange the songs in different orders, and even do some you haven't done for a while, but basically you're doing the same ones over and over. I think the best bit of recording we ever did was in 1995 when we did 'Lucky', 'Talk Show Host' and 'Bishop's Robes' and we had three days to do it in. And to be able to do it and be that creative is a great feeling. It's a really good discipline to have, especially in the midst of a tour. Our problem in the studio is that we often over-analyse, and we do some of our best recording when we don't have that much time to record."

"Thing is," says Colin, "it reminds me of being in Munich three years ago, before 'The Bends', and Thom was then working on a song called 'Street Spirit' on a four-track in the back of a dingy old bus. Now we've got a lovely bus – three actually! – with all this excellent digital equipment, but it's the same deal really. Thom is still basically sitting in the back of the bus recording."

Later that afternoon we hear a couple of these new songs as their soundman skates around the venue during the soundcheck. One is a very jaunty rocker (almost rockabilly, actually, in the way that Johnny Marr would sometimes write semi-rockabilly songs with The Smiths) characterised by a big, Stones-y guitar riff that Thom only half-sings along to. The other one, which Thom announces as, "Let's do 'Glass House', or whatever it's called", is painfully fragile and beautiful. In the crisp and depressing environs of an empty Huxleys it sounds as doomed as 'Perfect Day' being covered by Joy Division, with Thom singing about *"being in trouble with my best friend"*, and her smashing his glass house up and, maybe, cutting herself. Even the wolfy German security guards in Harley Davidson leathers, Hell's Angels patches and spiked rings listen with moist eyes.

"It's a bit early to say what the new stuff is going to be like," says Ed. "But if anything it'll be more diverse. I think we'll go down the 'Airbag' route more often, using loops a lot, but then there'll be other stuff where we'll be a really simple, close-miked five-piece band. We want to make really diverse records and I get off on that. I remember one criticism of 'Pablo Honey' was that it all

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The emotion of the occasion even propelled the band towards their own aftershow party in a club across Barcelona – a rare treat indeed for the coachloads of media types and hooray marketing men and women chinking G&Ts around the pool table and gawping at the video screens displaying images of clubbers clubbing in various states of undress. And one that is unlikely to be repeated if Jonny Greenwood's body language was anything to go by. Watch him (along with every couch potato here) wandering awkwardly through the boozy throng shaking hands with well-wishers and heading, not to the toilet as he keeps insisting, but right through the exit and out into the night air.

Now, back among his colleagues and management again in the hotel suite, he seems more at ease and greets *NME*'s praise of last night with thanks and a warm smile. Thom appears relatively relaxed too, relieved perhaps that he has an hour to sit and

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sounded so different – 'This band's schizo!'. At the time we were like, 'Yeah, but that's good!'. Ten years ago when we were rehearsing in village halls we'd do a ska song, then a big rock song, then whatever. It was all pretty rubbish, obviously, but the variety was there."

Is it hard writing a follow-up to what many regard as the album of the year, maybe one of the albums of the decade?

"I think it's a much better situation to be in now," says Colin, "where you're going in to make a record and you're under pressure because everyone said the last album was good. Rather that than be under pressure because everyone says that one song on the last album was good, which is where we were when we went in to record 'The Bends'. 'OK Computer' is the start of something else."

"I would never say it was the best album of the year," says Ed modestly. "I think Supergrass made a really underrated, great album. I think the Blur album is good, and Portishead's. I've always hated those musical fascists – I suppose it goes back to school – those people who say, 'Uh, you can't like that, it's rubbish'. I think you can only say things are the best in hindsight. You can say 'Pet Sounds' was the best album of '66. That is a fact. If you start saying you've made the best album of the year, you're putting yourself up there and we've never been great media tarts."

You're aware of its qualities, though.

"We all went away for a few weeks after the Brixton show in September," says Ed, "and I suddenly woke up and could be objective about the album. We went through stages during the recording when we thought, 'This is a great', and then eight weeks before it came out we didn't know what we'd done at all. We thought we'd made a perverse album that goes off on too much of a tangent. But it was really good to get away from playing the songs every night, put it on, get a bit stoned and not think about what went into making every track and to just listen to it. I called up Thom and said, 'I listened to the album objectively last night and this is a f—ing great album'. It's really great."

"What do you think, then?" asks Colin. "End of year, everyone's albums? Who's it going to be? The Verve, Oasis, Björk? I think The Verve album's got a couple of great songs on it, couple of hit singles which we never had. I really like Oasis, but I think their new album sounds too much like they were trying to make a record that reflects where they want to be. Which is fine if you want to play to 40,000 people in sheds across America and Earls Court or wherever... I don't think the Spiritualized album should be overlooked. It peters out towards the end a bit, but the first three tracks are brilliant. When it first came out we played it constantly."

Evolution is the key. Radiohead don't feel under the same pressures they felt before, the pressure to prove that they weren't one-hit wonders when they recorded 'The Bends', or the pressure to be the biggest band in the world that they've shrugged off with 'OK Computer'. The only pressure they feel now is to keep making records that sound different to the last one, that go places they haven't been before.

"We've got this whole ethic of wanting to try new things out," says Ed. "We don't want to do the same thing twice, certainly not within the space of a couple of albums. We want to go to new places musically, but at the same time we're not going to take forever to get there. I think The Stone Roses taking that long to make 'Second Coming' served as a lesson to a lot of bands. You can't leave it too long. I think we'll probably tour the next album, but maybe the album after that not tour and do an album a year. But who knows? 'OK Computer' was supposed to be a happy, chirpy, vaguely poppy album, that's what we told everyone last year, then we got to the studio and it was a bit emotionally fraught at times.

"We've been doing this non-stop since the end of '91, six years, and it would be kinda nice to have a bit of life back home. Couple of the band are married and couple of the others are in serious relationships and I'm sure they could do with putting time in with that... Thing is, we want to carry on making records. It won't be there forever. We're fully aware that bands only have so big a window of opportunity. Once it becomes too comfortable and you have it all sussed, that's the day you start to make shit records. I think it's good that things aren't that stable, if we ever make a record that's easy or fun to make, it's gonna be a shit record. We know now that when we make a record it's gonna be relatively fraught. We thought 'The Bends' was a one-off."

But 'OK Computer' wasn't as fraught as that – during 'The Bends' things got so heavy that a whole session was scrapped and there were times when it was unclear if Radiohead even had a future.

"Well, 'The Bends' was a personal thing because we were so insecure. We thought we didn't like each other. It was pathetically middle-class and born out of people not speaking their mind. But now we do speak our mind, or at least say what we feel, and we know it's not going to be anything personal. And we're a lot more secure with the band too. We never wanted to be the biggest band in the world, we just wanted to know we could make another record and we can make one now – two actually! Now we can relax. We don't have to have all the answers in the next album."

Right now, though, enough answers are provided by 'OK Computer' and their live show. Tonight's performance is a more edgy, less celebratory affair than Barcelona, with Thom snarling his way maliciously through 'Talk Show Host' and then mischievously announcing that, "This one's a karaoke number for all the Japanese businessmen: 'Creep'". His performance is wired and uptight, and spills sourly over just before the encore.

"Thanks for coming," he starts, "you've been good. It's just a shame that I haven't been able to see any of your city today but our lives don't seem to allow that any more. Our lives consist of just press, soundcheck, gig now..."

And your heart bleeds for the little lambkin. After all, most of the audience have probably spent all day wandering around Berlin, going to galleries and sitting in parks, and not working or attending school or anything mundane like that. Thom's angst may make for beautiful music, but it's an ugly mask to wear when he's actually fulfilled.

Afterwards, though, everyone seems in pretty good fettle. Jonny is being led, hand-in-hand, by a roadie towards the bus when we arrive in the dressing-room, which is where Thom, head bowed and just ahead of him, also scoots off to. Colin, meanwhile, is sitting on a sofa cracking gags, and Ed wanders in puffing on a joint with the film-makers.

"Did you see the audience?" he asks. "Wow, some of that stuff was crazy!"

Could he really see what we saw, the hairy hippy guys dancing at the back of the hall to 'Karma Police' like long-lost Woodstock trippers in DMs, skinny-rib pink T-shirts and army fatigues?

"Er, no. I meant the girls down the front. It was frightening. God! I tell you, it's not easy being the only single man in the group sometimes."

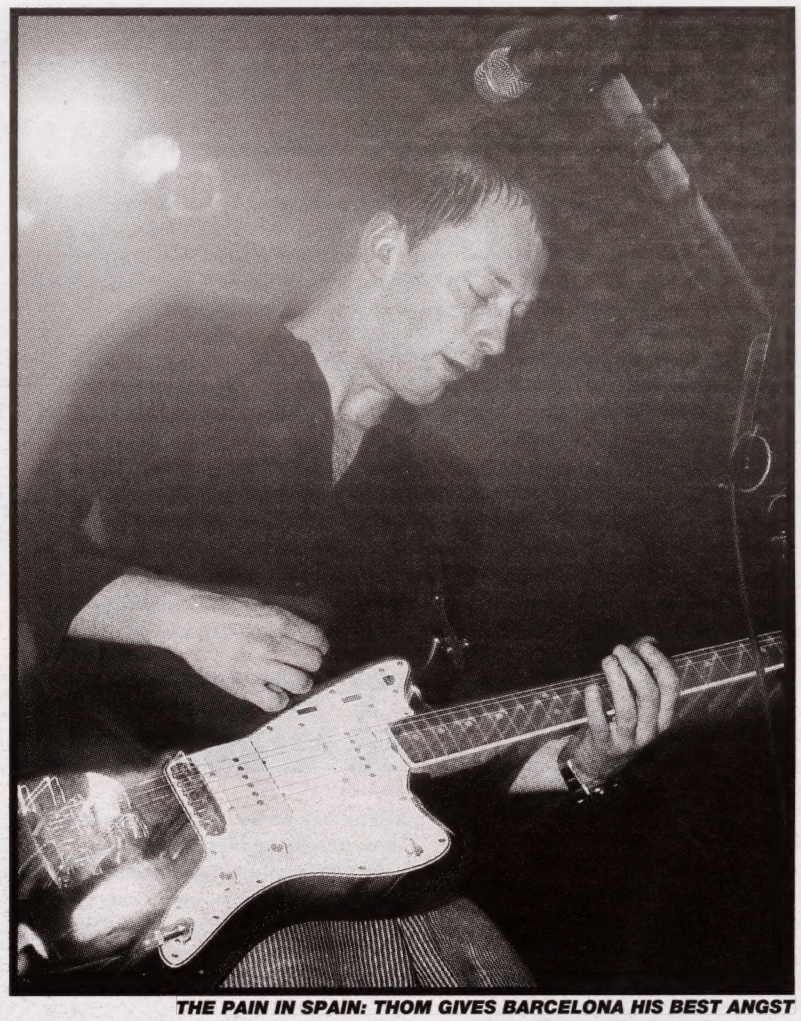
Slowly people filter out of the dressing room until we're left with Colin and Ed, who are a little high and very excited about the Lear Jet they'll be taking tomorrow morning with Phil to an awards bash in London.

"I can't wait," says Ed. "It's like James Bond, getting a Lear Jet. It only takes about eight passengers, I can't imagine what it's going to be like."

"Very fast and dangerous," says Colin. "I hope."

Outside the buses and lorries rumble into life as rig after rig after box after box is wheeled in and packed away, the crew wearing jaded expressions as they lift and load, lift and load.

"Yes," says Colin with wonder, "in England we'll have three lorries and four tourbuses... Rock! It's a thing, isn't it? I suppose it'd be a seven-year-old boy's wet dream, all this business. Eddy had a rare moment of clarity the other night when he said, 'Thank f— we all get on and have been doing this a long time and work with people we love because it's a completely insane existence'."



THE PAIN IN SPAIN: THOM GIVES BARCELONA HIS BEST ANGST

Locked away in one of those buses are Thom and Jonny. They can't get enough of this insane existence. Instead of taking a Lear Jet to a knees-up in London, they'd rather take an overnight coach ride to Stockholm. Gives them a chance to catch up on their reading and watch a few videos. They'll probably do some recording too. Very fast and dangerous? Jonny and Thom will settle for very slow and intense every time.

November 19, 12.30am

There's an aftershow party going on in an antiseptic chamber at the back of Birmingham NEC, but Radiohead learnt their lesson way back in Barcelona and most of them have opted to stay away. Phil's in, though, with some of his family, and Chris Hufford, who also manages Supergrass, is pressing record company flesh and generally playing host.

"Oh, hello," he says with a misty look. "Sorry, did I meet you with the 'Head or the 'Rass? It gets so confusing..."

Tonight's show was a warmer, brighter, sweeter one than Berlin. It could've been the relief of being back on home soil at last, or perhaps it was the fact that this was the penultimate gig of the year before Aberdeen tomorrow, but somehow Radiohead infused their performance in this cavernous arena with more intensity than ever. There was a moment at the end of a spine-tingling, synapse-zapping 'Planet Telex', as Thom strolled out of the dense music and away into the white light and bright smoke, when it felt like watching something truly extraterrestrial. Or the moment that 'Exit Music...' cracks open and shatters Thom's perfect vocal with that weird mix of bass-heavy melancholy and exhilaration. If anything, it works better in front of the 12,000 people here than the 2,000 in Berlin.

"I think we approach playing these large shows with as much fear, trepidation, doubt and self-doubt as anyone," says Colin. "It's certainly not something we've geared our whole career to, that's pretty evident from the album. I think that if we get a song as intimate 'Exit Music...' across to that many people without turning it into a lighter fest, then that's cool. And I hope it sounds good out there, because it really is wonderful playing on a stage that big, you can hear every detail."

And throughout you're transfixed, not just by the depth of the performance or Thom's stunning voice, but equally by what a wonderful guitarist Jonny is. That squiggly bit in 'Subterranean Homesick Alien', for example, how did he stumble on *that*? You'd like to talk to him about it, and indeed yesterday his office said you could. But on the train up to Brum the call came through: he'd changed his mind. Oh well.

"I can't think of anyone else in my generation who has come to their instrument," says Nigel Godrich, "and left it as a different instrument. The way that Hendrix changed the way that people looked at guitars, likewise Jonny does things that people will imitate in ten years. Stylistically he does something original, which is no mean feat in this day and age. But Ed's a great player too and Thom is a fantastically gifted guitarist, but you don't notice because he's got that amazing voice..."

In the end, though, it's the whole that overwhelms its powerful parts. Radiohead are probably alone amongst guitar groups in doing something this sonically fresh within songs that are universally touching. They're pushing the envelope, writing stuff that's scarily introspective and without historic lineage, yet they're doing it in arenas, without stage props or Pink Floyd wibble. Does this make them pioneers?

"I get the feeling," says Ed, "that there is a mood we share with bands like Blur, Portishead, Massive Attack, that now they've become the mainstream, they want to get out of the spotlight. Of course Blur embraced it for a while, and it was probably fun going to Damien Hirst's or the Groucho. But that's never been an issue for us, we wouldn't know what to say to those people. But even Oasis, you get the feeling they don't want to go down those mainstream paths any more, they've got one eye on those horrible years in the '80s when bands did the Prince's Trust gigs. But musically, I feel a real affinity with Portishead or especially Massive Attack. 'Risingson' did a very similar thing that 'Paranoid Android' does. Both singles shook people's preconceptions of each band up. At first people weren't sure about the Massive single, but now it sounds so excellent.

"We hope we carry on like that. So that every time you hear a new Radiohead song you might scratch your head and wonder what's happened to the old group. We don't want to arrive at a Radiohead sound. We're going to keep surprising you."

This may even extend to their life outside the group, because as we leave the aftershow, Colin suddenly appears at the door with a beer and a big smile.

"Are you going?" he asks as a stream of people file past him, each shaking his hand as they go. "Oh dear, I was just coming in for a drink. I feel like I've just missed my birthday party, like I should give you a piece of cake in napkin as you leave. Oh well, goodbye, goodbye."

As we walk away we turn back and Colin is still there, head cocked to one side and waving.

"Cheerio, then," he shouts.

Cheerio, Colin, cheerio.

"I REALLY LIKE OASIS, BUT I THINK THE ALBUM SOUNDS TOO MUCH LIKE THEY WERE TRYING TO MAKE A RECORD THAT REFLECTS WHERE THEY WANT TO BE. WHICH IS FINE IF YOU WANT TO PLAY TO 40,000 PEOPLE IN SHEDS ACROSS AMERICA..." – COLIN

"'OK COMPUTER' WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A HAPPY, CHIRPY, VAGUELY POPPY ALBUM, THEN WE GOT TO THE STUDIO AND IT WAS A BIT EMOTIONALLY FRAUGHT AT TIMES." – ED